

Lebanon Hills Regional Park

Master Plan Summary

Vision for the Park

The vision for Lebanon Hills Regional Park is to provide a balance between human use of the park and its ecological preservation and protection. This vision reflects the simplicity of the outdoor experience being sought in the context of an ecologically healthy natural landscape. The master plan provides direction to achieve this vision, whereby the individual and societal values gained through the pursuit of recreation at Lebanon Hills Regional Park will be enhanced as the visitor is immersed in a varied and ecologically healthy natural landscape.

Section 1: Introduction/Planning Framework

Master Plan pages 1.1-1.5

The project focused on the preparation of a comprehensive master plan for Lebanon Hills Regional Park. The planning process took into consideration the history of the site, setting, recreational and educational needs of the region, and the natural and cultural resources of the park itself. The master plan establishes a vision for the park and provides the guidelines for its ecological management and physical development to appropriately accommodate public use. The plan is also a tool for public presentations and preparing funding applications.

Although comprehensive, the master plan is still only the first step in the planning, development, and management of this unique and wonderful resource. It should be viewed as firm enough to guide park improvements, yet flexible enough to change based on increased knowledge, experience and changing public needs.

Project Organization and Process

The park-planning consultant for the project was Brauer and Associates, Ltd. Principles of the firm acted as facilitators throughout the course of the project and solicited input from the general public, the 26-member Stakeholders Task Force and the 10-person Technical Team of Dakota County staff. The consultant assessed all input, evaluated alternative solutions and made independent recommendations to the Park and Recreation Advisory Committee.

The planning approach followed a step-by-step process that was supported by public participation and allowed for a series of internal checks and balances to ensure that issues were addressed with due diligence. Inherent to the process was finding the right balance between human use of the park and its ecological preservation. The planning process went to great lengths to ensure that the natural qualities of the park would remain influential in decision-making. Establishing the ecological parameters and protection strategy was the first step, after which the physical development of the park was considered. The master plan was developed with the belief that human use of the park, and the individual and societal enrichment that it provides, will lead to increased citizen support for the protection of the park's resources and values.

Section II: Setting/History/ Trends/Cultural Values

Master Plan pages 2.1-2.16

This section of the master plan considers the setting for the park, its history, trends affecting its future, and its cultural values. The master plan seeks to position the park to accommodate a broadening sphere of cultural values while preserving the ecological systems and sense of place that bring people there in the first place. Considered collectively, these variables played a major role in shaping the master plan and how the decisions made today will affect the park's future 10, 20, or even 50 years hence.

Section III: Existing Conditions of Ecological Resources

Master Plan pages 3.1-3.14

Lebanon Hills Regional Park displays a very diverse, interesting, and unique natural landscape character. As a regional park exhibiting an array of landscapes ranging from moraine hills to lakes and ponds, land stewardship, ecological preservation, and water resources management are all high on the priority list. This section provides an overview of the ecological resources of the park and sets the stage for Section IV, which provides a framework for ecological stewardship.

Although Lebanon Hills Regional Park represents an impressive assemblage of natural resources, the vast majority of these systems have undergone severe degradation over the past several decades. A comprehensive restoration and management program is needed if natural communities, such as oak savanna, prairies, and aquatic resources are to be restored.

Threats to the ecological systems of the park are from internal sources such as erosion from trails and parking lot storm water runoff and from external development-related causes. The primary external cause is land development and the subsequent change in hydrologic characteristics and flow rates, which have compromised the ecological health of the park and exacerbated the propensity for flooding.

Section IV: Ecological Stewardship and Water Resources Management

Master Plan pages 4.1-4.39

Ecological stewardship refers to the thoughtful care of the ecological systems to preserve the natural qualities and character that are fundamental to the park's intrinsic values as a place of natural beauty and respite from the built environment. For the long-term ecological health of the park, a well-defined, ongoing stewardship plan will be required. Although Dakota County has already established some restoration programs, the magnitude of the natural resource restoration work that is required to preserve the natural qualities that still exist and reintroduce those once found in the park is profoundly greater than what has occurred in the past. Simply stated, lacking a long-term commitment to ecological stewardship will undoubtedly result in a continuous decline in the ecological diversity and vitality of the park.

The philosophical basis of the plan is heavily reliant on the implementation of restoration and management programs. The goal is to reverse the current downward trend in the quality of the park's natural resources and achieve a sustainable landscape quality that can be perpetuated.

Ecological Stewardship Program Overview

The plan provides a comprehensive framework for the development of an ecological stewardship program for the park. As defined in this section, there are three primary phases to restoring and managing this unique natural resource:

- ▶ Testing and Education Phase – broadens understanding of ecological stewardship within the park from a scientific and public education perspective.
- ▶ Remedial Phase – involves major tasks for restoring each of the native plant communities found within the park.
- ▶ Maintenance Phase – involves long-term management tasks to ensure that a healthy natural landscape is perpetually maintained.

Water Resources Management Plan Overview

The draft *Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan* (CWRMP) dated May of 2000 was reviewed to ensure that it was in alignment with the vision for the park that emerged from the master planning process. Key aspects of that vision that relate to water resource management include the desire to:

- ▶ Return the park's wetlands, ponds, and lakes to a more natural hydrologic state.
- ▶ Enhance water quality within the park's water bodies.
- ▶ Restore native vegetation in both upland and aquatic systems.
- ▶ Manage stormwater to reduce the propensity for unnatural fluctuations in water levels and flooding within and downstream of the park.

The master plan recommends that the CWRMP be refined to ensure that its recommendations are aligned with the vision of the master plan. This includes the investigation of off-site stormwater management opportunities and using ecologically-based approaches to stormwater management within the park as preferred solutions to water resources management.

Ecological Stewardship Program and Water Resources Management Plan Conclusions

The conclusion drawn by the master plan is that implementation of the Ecological Stewardship Program and Water Resources Management Plan is fundamentally important to preserving this valuable and unique natural resource. Although human use issues will continue to be of interest to citizens of the region, these pale in comparison to the important decisions that need to be made to preserve the natural systems in this park for future generations to enjoy. Lacking a strong commitment to reverse the current ecological trends facing the park, its long-term prospects are much more suspect. Today is indeed the time to take action and begin the slow, but all-important, process of long-term stewardship of these wonderful resources.

Section V: Development Master Plan

Master Plan pages 5.1-5.61

The Development Master Plan is a direct outgrowth of an extensive public participation process that considered all facets of the park's future use. As defined in Section I, preparation of this plan was the last step in the planning process to ensure that the ecological underpinning of the park and major land use zones were evaluated prior to considering specific development initiatives. Whereas ecological stewardship was considered in the previous sections, this section considers the major land use zones and the development program for the park.

The Development Program defines the uses of the park and facilities to support these uses. Showing development restraint while serving the needs of the public was a key underpinning for the master plan. Public sentiment was clearly focused on minimizing the built footprint to the degree possible. The Program finds a responsible balance between providing facilities without compromising natural qualities. Major components are the following:

Trails: The master plan provides for a variety of trail opportunities, with a major emphasis on allowing visitors to enjoy the park without compromising its natural qualities. Trail types found in the park include:

- ▶ Nature Trails – the most extensive of the trail types offering an intimate, natural character.
- ▶ Connector Trails – link together the major development areas within the park and allow for a higher degree of accessibility than the nature trails.
- ▶ Equestrian Trails – continue a long history of this type of trail within the park.
- ▶ Mountain Bike Trails – also continues a history of this type of trail within the park, with a particular focus on enhancing the quality of these trails, improving safety, and reducing ecological impact.

Trailheads: Five existing (but redeveloped) and one new trailhead are proposed. This dispersed approach spreads use across a greater percentage of the park and reduces the size of any one trailhead.

Visitor Center: The Schulze Lake vicinity was selected as the most appropriate location for this facility. The area represents a reasonable balance between providing needed facilities and avoiding a new development area. The Visitor Center will focus on immersing the visitor in an educational experience and be designed for multiple, year-round use and services to park visitors.

Schulze Swimming Beach: The master plan proposes to phase out the existing beach house and construct a new one at a more central location. General improvements to the beach area itself are also included.

Schulze Entrance Road and Parking: The existing road, which is located in an ecologically sensitive area, poses significant hydrologic concerns that warrant evaluation and appropriate action. If the need to relocate the entrance road is substantiated, the preferred location is east of McDonough Lake. Both the Visitor Center and potential road relocation offer opportunities to improve the existing parking lot to better suit the need and be more in keeping with a park setting.

- Holland Lake Use Area:** The Master plan concurs with the planned expansion of the parking lot and construction of an access road as part of the Cliff Road improvement project.
- Campground Use Area:** All aspects of the previous concept plan were reviewed. Recommended changes are to naturalize the original RV campground area, construct a smaller contact station, and construct primitive sites only at a location between the existing loops.
- Camp Sacajawea Use Area:** The vision is a comprehensive outdoor and environmental education-based immersion experience in a secure setting and facilities that offer flexibility to accommodate various users and programs with natural and cultural focus. Providing expanded opportunities that are compatible with the existing youth-oriented focus will be sought.
- Camp Sacajawea Lodge and Camper Cabins:** Improvements to the functionality of the Lodge and the construction of simple cabins are proposed.
- Maintenance Facility:** The master plan calls for the relocation of the existing facility from a prime ecological area to a more efficient location.
- Land Acquisition:** No lands outside the current park boundary are proposed for acquisition. In regard to in-holdings, acquisition when opportunity arises is recommended, with certain parcels identified as priorities.
- County-Owned House Rentals:** The master plan calls for rentals to be phased out in the shortest acceptable timeframe.

Section VI: Implementation, Operations, and Management Plan

Master Plan pages 6.1-6.24

The implementation of the master plan for Lebanon Hills Regional Park will require significant initial and long-term capital investments for ecological stewardship, physical development, operations, maintenance, and programming. In all likelihood, implementation will occur over a number of years as funding and resources become available and plans become refined and ready for implementation.

Implementation Programs and Estimated Costs

The following summarizes the potential costs for each aspect of the master plan:

Ecological Stewardship Program	
Remedial Work	\$3,475,000 - \$7,350,000
Annual Maintenance	\$ 203,750 - \$ 281,250
Water Resource Management	
	\$ 800,000 - \$2,000,000
	(costs are difficult to ascertain given the variables)

Development Program Cost Projections

Trails/amenities/canoe course	\$2,380,000
Trailheads	\$ 505,000
Schulze Use Area (includes visitor center, road, parking lot)	\$2,450,000
Holland Use Area	\$ 145,000
Schulze Beach (new beach building, misc.)	\$ 390,000
Campground (contact station, misc.)	\$ 460,000
Camp Sacajawea (expansion of lodge, cabins, and misc.)	\$ 950,000
Maintenance Facility (new and removal of existing, misc.)	\$2,900,000
Signage (complete makeover)	\$ 140,000
Misc. site amenities (e.g., demolition of rental houses)	\$ 350,000
Construction contingency (15%), professional fees	\$3,441,075
Total Development Program Cost Estimate	<u>\$14,111,075</u>

Implementation Categories

The Implementation Plan has four categories that reflect major implementation challenges for the park:

- ▶ Ecological Stewardship Program – developing and implementing program is a top priority, with emphasis on developing perpetual funding source for long-term commitments.
- ▶ Water Resource Management Program – priority is to align with the vision of an ecologically-based approach to water resources management , followed by aggressive implementation.
- ▶ Development Program – follows a traditional strategy, with the following priorities:
 - Projects currently funded or in the CIP.
 - Projects which offer high recreation value, protect safety, and/or curtail ecological degradation.
 - Redevelopment of antiquated or substandard high use facilities.
 - Projects that accommodate demand for new and enhanced recreational opportunities.
 - Other projects defined by the plan.
- ▶ Acquisition Program – predominate strategy is to purchase from willing sellers.

Implementation Priorities

The implementation plan is a reflection of the vision for the park and establishes an overall strategy and set of priorities. By committing to balanced implementation of the master plan, the cultural and ecological values of the park will grow on par with each other. However, the plan is flexible to react to conditions that may present themselves.

Taking a balanced approach to implementation was found to offer the highest potential for realizing the park vision. As decisions are made regarding implementation and funding strategies, all four implementation categories will be of equal priority. This balanced approach also allows priorities within each category to be pursued simultaneously to take advantage of funding opportunities that may arise. Furthermore, this approach allows

greater flexibility in developing effective implementation sequences that link the four categories together whenever it is advantageous to do so.

Policy Related Issues

A number of policy-related issues were considered under the master plan. The following summarizes the key aspects of these issues:

- ▶ **Campground Long-Term Stays** – the master plan calls for stays to be limited to a maximum of two weeks to reflect policies more typical of regional park campgrounds.
- ▶ **Snowmobiling** – eliminating the use of snowmobiles was strongly supported by the public and the master plan calls for ceasing this use after the 2000/2001 winter season.
- ▶ **Commercial Use of Horse Trails** – long-term commercial use of the park for horseback riding was not advocated by the master plan due to ecological concerns. The existing commercial use by one provider is expected to cease within the next 10 years. The master plan recommends that Dakota County work with this provider to resolve maintenance issues caused by their current use of the trails. Developing a policy for the occasional commercial use is recommended once the existing operation is discontinued.
- ▶ **Off-Leash Pet Areas** – One of the emerging trends recognized during the planning process is the demand for designated off-leash pet exercise areas and off-leash trails in parks. Although no provisions are provided within the park under the master plan, it does recommend further investigation of this issue by Dakota County in concert with local municipalities, whereby options can be developed and considered to help determine if Lebanon Hills or some other parks are best suited locations for this use. The master plan allows some flexibility on how this issue will ultimately be addressed.

Public Involvement In Implementing the Master Plan

The master plan commits to continuing public involvement in its implementation. The degree to which this will occur will vary depending on what aspect of the plan is being implemented. For larger scale projects such as the Visitor Center, public involvement in the actual design process for the facility will be fairly extensive and involve representation from key stakeholders. For smaller scale projects, such as trail realignment for erosion purposes, notifications of interested parties or advocates would be a more appropriate approach. The objectives associated with involving citizens in the implementation process include:

- ▶ Determining who the stakeholders are and their interest in a particular development initiative.
- ▶ Understanding stakeholders needs and unique perspectives.
- ▶ Identifying and understanding concerns and problems.
- ▶ Developing alternatives and finding appropriate solutions with input from stakeholders.

The Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee advises the County Board on development initiatives.

Master Plan Revisions and Updates

There may be justification for revisions and updates to the master plan in response to new information, trends, and general demands. If a review was found to be warranted, the master plan indicates that Dakota County would undertake an appropriate public process. Trigger points that could prompt review are:

- ▶ Requests, after determining that adequate justification exists.
- ▶ Recreational trend information uncovers a need.
- ▶ Changed circumstances pertaining to existing uses.
- ▶ Existing facilities are proven inadequate.

Maintenance

Accomplishing the maintenance needs of Lebanon Hills is a challenge. It is the largest and most visited park in the Dakota County system, with challenges such as serious water management problems, highly erodible soils and surrounding development that create impacts and require a maintenance response. It is unlikely that existing staff and budget will be sufficient to meet the maintenance needs/priorities identified by the master plan. For example, the ultimate success of trail rehabilitation and natural resource management efforts will require stewardship for many years to achieve desired results. Traditional and non-traditional funding and staffing sources will have to be pursued to meet the objectives.

Outdoor Education and Programming

Public opportunities for natural resource-based recreation and education are of significant importance as it is a cornerstone of the Parks Department mission.